

### There will be blood: expecting violence in Egypt, 2011-2013

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## There will be blood. Expecting violence in Egypt, 2011-2013

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE WHO ARE NOT REMEMBERED



Caricature by JF Andeel, July 2013. Copyright: JF Andeel

From January 2011 to early June 2013, I occasionally wrote in my blog about everyday life and politics in Egypt during a time of revolution. The final blog entry, written in the beginning of June, told about the growing opposition against Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Tamarod campaign, and the expectation expressed by many people I spoke with, certain that »there will be blood« (*hayibqa fi dam*) or even »there's got to be blood« (*lazim yibqa fi dam*). I heard it so often that I thought about using it as the title for that blog entry. But optimistic as I was about the capability of the Tamarod campaign to provide a peaceful, civil alternative, I hesitated, and instead titled it »Seize the day«.

A few weeks later, the day was seized. And there was blood.

Anger escalated at an extreme pace, mutual accusations and provocations were unleashed, fuelled by a media campaign (the mass media had been brought under nearly total government control immediately after 3 July) that made no distinction between truth and lies, only between friend and foe. A large number of Egyptians (with no reliable polls to tell how large) ultimately came to agree that defeating and killing the Muslim Brothers was necessary, right, and

good. Throughout July, a series of violent clashes and massacres unfolded. Most of the people killed were supporters of the deposed president, and the most common cause of death was sniper fire. The escalation reached its peak on 14 August 2013 in the storming of the Rabi'a al-Adawiya and al-Nahda Square sit-ins in Cairo, which were followed by clashes and attacks on police stations and Christian properties in several cities. Violence has continued ever since, with people killed in demonstrations, disappearing and tortured in prisons, Jihadist bombings aiming at police and military targets, and ordinary citizens getting into fights with each other.

Both sides accused the others of being guilty of violence, and legitimised their struggle by the violence exerted by the other side. However, there was a great asymmetry in the killings. Those supporting the storming of the Rabi'a al-Adawiya sit-in have regularly cited the fact that policemen and conscripts were also killed, and that some of the protesters were armed. According to the Ministry of Health, the nationwide death toll on 14 August 2013 was 638, including 43 conscripts<sup>1</sup> and police or army officers. In contrast, according to the documentation of Wiki Thawra (Wiki Thawra 2013), the nationwide death toll on 14 August was 1,385 (among them 52 conscripts and police or army officers), and 399 more (48

<sup>1</sup> In Egypt, conscripts serve not only in the army but also in the ranks of the Central Security Forces of the Ministry of Interior.



conscripts and officers) were killed during the next five days. The same source cited that the storming of the Rabi'a al-Adawiya sit-in cost 904 lives alone, 7 among them policemen or conscripts (see Human Rights Watch 2013). Whatever the exact figures may be, the asymmetry is evident. What happened was not a battle but a massacre.

Granted that nearby countries have recently suffered even greater bloodshed, notably Iraq, Sudan, and Syria, this still does not make Egypt a blessed safe haven surrounded by chaos, as the Egyptian state media asserts. The number of people killed in Egypt between summer 2013 and spring 2014 may not be nearly as terrible as in Syria, but it is terrible enough to be at par with the most recent Israeli campaign against Gaza in 2014 (although Egypt has been spared the material destruction Gaza has suffered). The Egypt of the el-Sisi era has bloodshed as a founding principle, and this has far-reaching political and moral consequences.

One year later, the new regime lead by Abdel-fattah el-Sisi has established its firm grip on power, but a lower level of confrontation continues, and so does the asymmetry in the killing. Many voices continue to call for the killing of Muslim Brothers and their allies because »this is the only way to deal with these people« (*el-nas dul mayinfā'sh ma'ahum gheir keda*). One of the most absurd consequences of this call for killing in order to stop the violence is the death sentences that a judge passed in two trials in March and April 2014 on 1,212 people for the murder of three policemen in al-Minya. In April and June, the same judge confirmed 220 of these sentences (which are being appealed), and it is unclear at the time of writing this whether the Egyptian judiciary system is committed to killing the sentenced men (see Human Rights Watch 2014). Many did not find these verdicts absurd, arguing instead that the sentenced were terrorists who had attacked police and innocent people. From their point of view, Egypt was facing an attack from violent and evil people, and the only way to deal with such people was to either imprison or kill them.

I do not intend to say that this was a sentiment shared by all Egyptians, perhaps not even the majority of them. Many were sceptical of the polarisation from the start, or have grown sceptical of it, and a large portion of the population remains sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood's cause. Most Egyptians continue to live in peace with one another despite irreconcilable political differences. Nevertheless, it is the mood that helped the current regime seize power, and resulted in a wave of killings that will haunt Egypt for a very long time.

The escalation in the summer of 2013 came as an unexpected turn of events to many of those who had come to appreciate and admire Egypt's »peaceful revolution« along with the flourishing social and cultural life that the 25 January revo-

lution had unleashed. It was a common assumption that the Muslim Brotherhood or some of their allies might opt towards violence if Morsi was toppled. Such violence on behalf of the defeated was to be expected, and some eventually did take place. But the violence of the victorious – which, by the asymmetrical nature of victory, is bound to be more brutal and devastating – has been much more extreme. The most shocking part of it was not its extent but the enthusiasm with which it was promoted by so many who just months earlier had expressed a considerably different stance.

And yet, this turn of events was in reality neither sudden nor surprising. Many Egyptians had been preparing themselves for extreme bloodshed since the beginning of the revolution, and if many Egyptian and foreign commentators failed to notice it, it was not because it wasn't there, but because we didn't want to see it. It didn't fit well with the beautiful picture of revolutionary resistance.

However, we cannot separate beautiful resistance from horrible bloodshed, just as we cannot isolate the flourishing of cultural life from the spread of violent street crime in and after 2011. They belong to one and the same process.

#### **What this essay is about**

I have been to Egypt often before and during the revolution, and I have accompanied circles of friends who describe themselves as »revolutionaries« (a position that from 2011 to 2013 was marked by a double rejection of the establishment of the old regime and of the Muslim Brotherhood) both in Alexandria and a village in the Nile Delta, and I have tried to understand the often troubling and contradictory nature of the revolutionary experience in ordinary life. I was not in Egypt in the summer of 2013 and did not witness the polarisation and escalation that happened in July and August. But I did see it growing in the months and years before. This is the background from which I ask two key questions: How did bloodshed emerge as a viable solution to the tensions and troubles of the revolutionary period? And how did different people who were on one particular side of the events from 2011 to 2013, react to the bewildering violence of the victorious in the summer and autumn of 2013?

With these questions, I try to contribute to a conversation opened by engaged academics writing about Egypt (e.g. LeVine 2014; Ali 2014), trying to understand the wide-scale support for killing that emerged in Egypt in the summer of 2013. My key argument is that the violence unleashed after 30 June 2013 was thoroughly moral in character, a consequence of an intensifying process of polarisation where the need to defend right against wrong was caught up in an ongoing sense of tension, confusion, anxiety and what I for the lack of a better term call »emboldenment«. (There is no doubt that the politicians and officers in power manipulated

the media and moral anger in a cynical and calculating fashion to promote their struggle for power. But on the level of general opinion among Egyptians, the moral quality of the polarisation was real and powerful. One should seriously consider the fact that politicians at times believe their own lies.) In this mood of »broken fear« (which is not the same thing as the overcoming of fear), the expectation that »there will be blood« was a promise of reaching clarity, purity and truth through a decisive battle. Tragically enough, it works. The incitement of bloodshed and the spiral of violence can be described as a form of ethical cultivation where a sense of purity is established through dramatic and radical confrontation. Paradoxically, during the bloody summer of 2013, moments of *irbak*, that is, confusion, bewilderment, and loss of solid ground, were sometimes more likely to open up ways out of the circle of hatred and confrontation while firm and clear principles might rather enforce that circle.

Bewilderment and confusion was the general mood in the summer and autumn of 2013 among some (probably a minority) of the leftist revolutionaries I know. They had participated in the 30 June movement, but expressed a sense of shock, confusion, and frustration about what resulted from the popular coalition in which they had participated. It is a sentiment that I too share with them. As an academic committed to support the revolutionary process in Egypt, I also supported the uprising against Morsi in the summer of 2013. The realisation of having participated, if only by the very weak means of academic essays, in a counter-revolution that has restored the Mubarak regime with reforms and adjustments, and at an enormous cost of human lives, causes moral trouble. It puts question marks on one's role as an academic whose job is to be critical and to ask difficult questions. What happened cannot be undone. But we can try to understand how it could happen.

The story I tell is a highly partial one. I do not make any claims to speak about Egypt or Egyptians in general. A different story could be told if we looked at Muslim Brotherhood supporters, or at sympathisers of other Islamic movements, or at old regime loyalists, or at the many people who did not take such firm stances. But this is the story of people who consider themselves as »revolutionaries« through a double opposition, towards the Mubarak regime on the one hand, and Islamist groups on the other.

### One of the events of the revolution

Much critical energy has been spent on asking whether the events that began on 30 June 2013 were a coup or a revolution. This is a misleading question.

There are two standard answers to this question. One is that it was a coup because Morsi was

the legitimate president and he was overthrown by an alliance from within the acting government and institutions of the state – most importantly the Ministries of Defence and Interior – and the Minister of Defence who directed the operation eventually became the new president. The other is that it was a revolution because it was based on a genuine mass movement of a variety of Egyptians overthrowing a failing president who refused to listen to the will of the people. It is true that the president was deposed by the Minister of Defence (who eventually became the new president), which by definition is a coup d'état. It is also true that this was supported by mass demonstrations that called for a revolution. But in reality, both claims are moral, not analytical statements. A coup is bad, a revolution is good. Saying that what happened was a coup is saying that what happened was bad and wrong. On the other hand, saying that what happened was a revolution is saying that it was good and right, or at least it was good and right in the beginning. But this is a misleading choice. First, it relies on a problematic depiction of popular legitimacy, be it by elections or demonstrations: if »the people« can be shown to support it, it is good. But beloved dictators are far more terrible than the hated ones because they can get away with crimes that are much worse. Second, and most importantly, the »revolution or coup?« choice is misleading because it is based on the assumption that a revolution is good. But why do we assume that? Revolutions are processes in which people are killed, things are broken, and in the end, the most powerful and ruthless parties gain power. In 1951, Albert Camus looked back at the great revolutionary transformations in Europe and noted:

All modern revolutions have ended in a reinforcement of the power of the State. 1789 brings Napoleon; 1848, Napoleon III; 1917, Stalin; the Italian disturbances of the twenties, Mussolini; the Weimar Republic, Hitler. These revolutions, particularly after the First World War had liquidated the vestiges of divine right, still proposed, with increasing audacity, to build the city of humanity and of authentic freedom. (Camus 1991)

Instead of the coup-revolution choice, I propose something more unpleasant. The polarisation and violence that followed 30 June 2013 has damaged Egypt and Egyptians deeply and lastingly. It has not only resulted in the killing of several thousands of people, it has also fractured and split the society in a way that will take generations to repair (and there may be much more bloodshed and damage ahead before the repair work can even begin). It has helped in the establishment of a populist dictatorial regime that will rule Egypt with an iron

hand for many years to come (although I must add that many consider this an accomplishment rather than a detriment). Last but not least, it has largely destroyed the revolutionary movement which either allowed itself to be co-opted by the counter-revolution, or was marginalised by the military vs. Muslim Brotherhood confrontation, or was suppressed and imprisoned. However, this was not a tragic derailment from the revolution's right track. Instead, we need to understand the 30 June counter-revolution as being a consequence of the revolutionary process, »one of the events of the revolution«, as one of the revolutionaries from the village called it. It is a continuation of the revolutionary process, a process of increasingly nervous tension and polarisation, and of the use of symbolic politics of confrontation where martyrdom and violence play a crucial role.

### **Believing in the glorious nation**

By the spring and summer of 2013, leftist revolutionaries from the village had come to consider the Muslim Brotherhood as a greater enemy than the old regime. For them, it was a matter of civil or secular versus religious politics, among other reasons. But the conflict line that divided Islamists from supporters of a civil and/or secular state would never have been sufficient to create the 30 June coalition. The dramatic infrastructural problems (fuel shortage, power outages) that became rampant during Morsi's rule would alone not have been sufficient to create such a coalition either. The most powerful and successful allegation against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood was not that they were fundamentalists, but that they were traitors to the nation. The opposition towards the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 was successful because it was articulated in nationalist terms.

The reality of Egypt after 30 June 2013 took a lot of Western academics as well as others by surprise because they did not anticipate the power of nationalism. In a time when the study of globalisation and transnational movements is in vogue, nationalism has not been a sexy research topic. In recent anthropology of the Middle East and Islam in particular, the nation has been most likely to appear in the framework of a critical study of the »secular nation-state«, implying the opposition of religion and secularity, where the nation-state is the side of the liberal, secular framework of power, and thus distinct from, even opposed to society. The idea that the state is an external upside of power that is opposed to, even adversary to society and its moral and ethical values, is a very liberal and American idea. But people in the Middle East often have a much more ambiguous relationship with the state. They may be oppressed by and at odds with some institutions of the state, such as bureaucratic institutions, the police, and so on. But at the same time, they may express a very firm love to-

wards the nation, towards the army, towards military struggle for national liberation. Additionally, through a highly expansive public service, a very large number of Egyptians are also government functionaries in one way or another, so the image of an invisible and invincible »deep state« needs to be complemented by the vision of a less mystical but very substantial »wide state«. (Brown 2013)

Egypt is a God-fearing country where fearing and trusting God is a key part of people's moral and spiritual world. But Egypt is also a militantly nationalist post-colonial country with a firmly rooted tradition of a national struggle where people believe in the nation, the Armed Forces, and the glorious October War. Patriotic values were enormously reinforced and magnified in the revolutionary uprisings across the Arab world in 2011. The national flag was always a central and highly ambiguous symbol that could be used to claim patriotic unity for the sake of entirely opposed aspirations and ideals (Winegar 2014). Before 2011, there was a widespread sense of frustration that was at times expressed in rather anti-patriotic terms. Such anti-patriotic sentiment largely disappeared in 2011, and instead, tremendous emotions festered in the body of the nation and »the people«. The revolution was very much a process of learning to love a nation that until then had shown little devotion to her sons and daughters. In 2011, that emotion was still directed at an abstract body of the nation and »the people« in the remarkable absence of a revolutionary leader. During the summer of 2013, the love for the nation became heavily personalised in the figure of a venerated leader: Abdelfattah el-Sisi, glorified as the saviour of the nation in songs and posters that covered homes, public spaces, and businesses across the country. Morsi supporters have tried to depict him in a similarly heroic fashion, which was not easy since he was notoriously uncharismatic while in office. Meanwhile, he has proven himself to be a much more inspired and charismatic political prisoner, using the show trial against him as a vehicle to stage himself as a fearless and uncompromising legitimate president.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood has argued in regard to the Danish caricature crisis of 2006 that the Western public failed to understand the »labour of love« invested in the Prophet Muhammad, making symbolic attacks against his person a matter of grave moral injury and anger (Mahmood 2009). Looking at the highly sensitive manner in which many Egyptians have reacted to any kind of critique of the Egyptian Army and nation in 2013 (be it by foreigners or by Egyptian critics of the military leadership), it seems that military struggles like the October War, the Army, and the unity of the nation have a similar kind of labour of love invested in them – a labour of loving something that is often not easy to love. In a similar manner, there is also an ongoing cultivation of a strong sen-





*Image circulated in social networks and as a printed poster, depicting el-Sisi as »Lion Heart«*

se of moral anger directed toward those who act or speak in a disrespectful manner about the things into which people invest so much love. Love is not just sweet and kind. It is also the ground of cultivating an attitude of being easily offended, and of feeling the urgent need to retaliate.

### **Martyrdom and killing**

Although the 25 January uprising was initially celebrated as a non-violent, peaceful revolution, more than a thousand people were killed by political violence during the first 18 days that resulted in the fall of president Hosni Mubarak. The vast majority of the casualties were protesters killed by security forces. These events gave rise to a veritable cult of the martyrs of the revolution.

In fact, martyrdom preceded the uprising. A key turning point was the murder of Khaled Said by police officers in Alexandria in the summer of 2010, which resulted in a first wave of protests, and turned Khaled Said's portrait into one of the most iconic images of the revolutionary period. The founding martyr of the revolution, Khaled Said has since been followed by thousands of others, although only a handful have made it to the prominent gallery of the revolution's martyrs. As violent events succeeded one another, new martyrs emerged, each of them associated with their own specific struggles, claims and calls for bringing justice. Often, the blood of the martyrs became the key ground of mobilisation more important than any specific political demands was to »bring justice for them or die like them« (*ya ngib haqquhum ya nmut zayyuhum*).

The link between martyrdom and non-violence is paradoxical. The Egyptian revolution was branded

as non-violent although many people were killed, and the killing continued and continues. It was non-violent only in the sense that while the police and regime loyalists killed many protesters, the protesters rarely killed policemen and loyalists.

Faisal Devji has pointed out that Gandhi, although known for his powerful use of non-violent tactics, was not in principle opposed to the possibility of violence and war. According to Devji, Gandhi actually supported the idea of war as a purifying moment in certain situations (Devji 2012). Non-violence, in Devji's reading of Gandhi, is not about no one getting hurt. Instead, non-violence is about occupying a moral high ground through an asymmetry of violence. The central moral principle of non-violence is that it is the other side that does the killing. This is where martyrdom becomes such a powerful weapon. The most tragic events have often been the most successful events of revolutionary movements because they have made people angry. As the confrontation continues, killing, martyrdom, and a righteous anger against the perpetrators become a central ground for the continuation of the struggle.

### **Polarisation**

The revolution began in a polarised situation where opponents of the Mubarak regime were pitted against the regime and its supporters in an antagonistic manner. However, when the military deposed Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011, there suddenly emerged a mediated narrative of Egyptians being united in victory, which they of course were not, because there were winners and losers. Antagonism was briefly buried under a vision of unity – a vision that quickly became a rather counter-revolutionary one, propagating a quick return to normality for the sake of a new, happier Egypt (Winegar 2011). There never actually was much unity, not even among the Tahrir protesters. Unity was claimed by silencing certain key differences. During the first sit-in in Tahrir Square for example, nationalists and secular movements were able to coexist with the Islamist movements because there was a clear agreement about not making certain claims or not carrying certain symbols.

After 11 February, the revolutionary coalition soon broke apart, as some groups were more successful than others in wrestling for a share of the power, while others were too weak to do so and instead opted for principal resistance. Starting from early March 2011, a split emerged between the major Islamist movements, who were well-organized and initially very successful in the struggle for power, and various leftist, liberal and less prominent Islamist groups. The latter were too weak and disorganised to seize power, but strong enough to spearhead a series of new protests and crises. In the course of 2011, they came to be called the »revolutionaries«. In the following two years, this

split – corresponding partly with a long-existing division between Islamist and other political groups that the Sadat and Mubarak regimes had often successfully exploited in favour of one or the other side – developed into antagonism between the revolutionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood, with the revolutionaries viewing the Brotherhood as traitors to the cause, and the Brotherhood trying to either co-opt or marginalise the revolutionaries. However this picture is complicated by Islamist groups such as the Hazemoun, followers of Hazem Abu Ismail who participated in protests against the military rule in 2011 and 2012 and only joined forces with the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer of 2012.

A turning point in this polarisation was the rise in power of the Muslim Brotherhood through the presidential elections of 2012 and their attempt to rule Egypt by themselves without sharing power with their former revolutionary allies (who were also not being cooperative). This resulted in old regime loyalists as well as leftist and liberal revolutionaries finding themselves on the same side in a new set-up of government and opposition, while revolutionary Islamist groups like the Hazemoun turned into allies of the new Brotherhood-led government.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of the Mubarak and Nasser regimes against the Muslim Brotherhood was appropriated by supporters of the revolutionary current, while people who had until then been very sceptical of revolution and protests appropriated revolutionary slogans and tactics. The anger of those who saw their privileges threatened by the emerging rule of the Brotherhood came together with the anger of those who saw the revolution stolen and betrayed by the Muslim Brotherhood. It was at this point that a narrative emerged according to which the Muslim Brotherhood was a foreign, treacherous, sectarian movement that did not – and could not – represent the Egyptian people. A shared oppositional narrative was established where the Muslim Brothers appeared as fundamentalist fascists and enemies of the nation who needed to be stopped before they took over the entire country. This narrative made it possible to channel oppositional anger (until then channelled against »the system«) against one specific group in the political scene. On the other side of the conflict line, a different narrative of polarisation was produced by supporters and allies of the Brotherhood, claiming that those who opposed

Morsi were either Christians, godless liberals, or corrupt old regime elites, and thus, once again, not the true Muslim Egyptian people.

During three years long stormy season of revolution (I think the word »spring« would be a very misleading seasonal metaphor), the landscape of political struggle was mapped by insults and stereotypes more than positive identifications. In the spring of 2011, there were *agendat* (»people with [foreign or particular] agendas«), *baltagiya* (»thugs«, originally referring to gangsters on the payroll of the police and government, but in spring 2011 the word became used to indicate civilians fighting on the opposing side in street battles, whichever that side may be), and after the fall of Mubarak, there were *filul* (»remnants« of the old regime). When the logic of political polarisation shifted, so did the insults. In the autumn of 2012, *khirfan* (»sheep«) became the standard insult against Muslim Brothers, implying that they were sheepishly taking orders rather than acting on their own accord. On their side, Islamists had turned the originally positive identifications *'almani* (»secularist«) and *laybirali* (»liberal«) into accusations insinuating that liberals, secularists, and socialists were in fact *kuffar* (»infidels«), an accusation that was not made by Muslim Brotherhood leaders in public discourse but more often expressed in the informal circles of local politics. In the summer of 2013, the new situation was once again accompanied by new insults: *irhabiyin* (»terrorists«) and *'abid el-biyada* (»slaves of the military boot«) (Andeel 2014). These and other insults not only structured the political field, they also denied those at whom they were addressed the capacity of being people with reasonable choices of their own accord. Instead, they depicted supporters of the opposing side as delusional, stupid, and wicked. Whatever they would say could be safely assumed to be a lie.<sup>3</sup>

This escalation of mutual distrust was accompanied by a series of violent events where supporters of different sides regularly accused the other side of bloodshed. It is almost impossible to get reliable and independent information about what actually happened in deadly events like the Ittihadiya Palace on 5-6 December 2012 (where both Morsi opponents and supporters were killed in unclear circumstances after supporters of Morsi stormed an anti-Morsi protest camp), at Port Said Prison on 26 January 2013 (where dozens were killed by police bullets following an attempt by protesters to storm the prison), or in Sidi Gaber in Alexan-

<sup>2</sup> The picture got even more complicated in early 2013 when the Salafi Nour Party, formerly the Muslim Brotherhood's most important ally, changed sides and joined the opposition. In 2013 and 2014, the Nour Party (which is dominated by clerics who have a remarkable history of loyalism towards the Mubarak regime) stood firmly on the side of el-Sisi, a strong reminder of the fact that the conflict between religious and secular politics is just one of the many important conflict lines.

<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 2013, this logic of insults gained a new dimension as words like »coup« or »human rights« were ironically misspelled as if they were foreign loanwords (إنكباب instead of انقلاب; or حقوق الإنسان instead of حقوق الإنسان), insinuating that concepts such as human rights were imported, empty words that had no bearing on the Egyptian reality and needed not to be taken seriously.

dria in late June and early July 2013 (where Morsi opponents and supporters clashed over several days). A spiral of mutual accusations emerged, an exchange of opinions beyond angry shouting became almost impossible, and each side perceived the other as violent.

The killing of protesters in January and February 2011 still caused a sense of shock and anger that was strong enough to oust Mubarak, even if it wasn't enough to actually topple the regime. Since then, many Egyptians had increasingly learned to cope with violent events and developed narratives and tropes of justification such as »Why were they there anyway?« or »They must have done something bad« or »They must have attacked first«, repeatedly cited to legitimise police brutality against protesters since the autumn of 2011. Although it was unlikely that one would accidentally find oneself in the middle of street clashes – they were highly localised, and life continued as usual only a few blocks away – political violence became normal.

At the same time, supporters of the revolutionary current were becoming increasingly disillusioned with peaceful action. Their repeated failure to make a difference through elections, and their relative success in stirring up the situation on some occasions through street action, compelled more and more of the people I know to argue in the winter and spring of 2013 that elections and peaceful means were inadequate to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from power and to establish what they hoped to be a truly revolutionary government.

One paradoxical component of this vision was the trope of »Muslim Brotherhood militias« that was regularly cited between 2012 and 2013 by opponents of the Brotherhood who claimed that the organisation was training paramilitary troops that were stepping in place of security apparatus. On some occasions, members of the Muslim Brotherhood were in fact acting as an informal police force against their opponents (most prominently during the Ittihadiya clashes in November 2012 – with all the brutality that goes along with police work in Egypt, see Human Rights Watch 2012). But the vision of the »Muslim Brotherhood militias« proved to be an exaggeration insofar that during 2012 and 2013 street battles, the Brotherhood's supporters and their allies usually were on the losing end. If the Brotherhood had militias, they were not good for much. This created a paradoxical mixture of fear and opportunity: the perceived need for firm defence against »militias« was combined with the practical realisation that the Muslim Brotherhood was actually quite weak and could be defeated in a street battle (Salem 2013).

This paradox was further amplified with the rise of the Tamarod campaign that began to collect signatures in the spring of 2013 for a popular impeachment of Morsi, with significant success.

The Tamarod movement represented itself as a legal and non-violent movement to make the people's voice heard. But when I was in Egypt in May and June 2013, I constantly heard people speaking about an impending bloodbath. The expectation was that the Brotherhood would not go voluntarily. They would fight back fiercely. They would need to be forced.

### Broken fear

The expectation that the others would fight fiercely was grounded, in part, in their own readiness to fight. Therefore, ideological polarisation is not the whole story. More was needed to make bloodshed seem a reasonable, even desirable path for a resolution.

The now proverbial »breaking of fear« has been frequently mentioned as one of the few true accomplishments of the uprisings of 2011 in the Arab world. Authoritarian regimes like those of Mubarak, Ben Ali, and Asad relied strongly on fear as the driving force that compelled citizens to avoid head-on confrontation and to be complicit with the system, even if they hated it. This sentiment is articulated well in the idiomatic expression *yimshi ganb el-hita* (»to walk by the side of the wall«), that is, to mind one's own business and to avoid the kind of confrontation and exposure that would result from pushing one's way through the middle of the street.

The revolutionary uprising marked a moment when a lot of people stopped walking by the side of the wall and instead boldly asserted their will, point of view, and way of doing things. There was a shake-up of many social taboos and inhibitions. Opinions that had been kept secret were openly expressed. Conflicts that had been suppressed were openly carried out. After the subdued mood of the Mubarak era, the mood of life became more radical and outspoken, and full of nervous tension. The examples commonly cited sound rather sympathetic: a flourishing artistic and cultural life, couples more likely to show their affection publicly, a multitude of different visions of life and points of view, and an ongoing series of protests and strikes vying to right wrongs instead of enduring them. But the same sense of emboldenment has also meant an increase in street crime, more violent sexual harassment, people settling their private conflicts with guns in the streets, an aggressive and impolite tone in interactions between people, and the idea that the best way to deal with one's political opponents is to eradicate them from the face of Earth.

Novelist Mukhtar Shehata, with whom I work on a research project about writers and literary careers in Alexandria, argues that the breaking of fear has been mistaken for a disappearance of fear. Instead, he says in an essay written in the spring of 2013 that we need to ask what has come in place of the fear that marked the Mubarak era:



The truth is that neither has fear been broken, nor have any other emotions been removed. Rather, these are new emotions born out of the preceding chaos of emotions. [...] Thus the emotion of natural, immediate fear is replaced by an entirely new emotion which we do not know but we call it »the broken fear«. (Shehata 2013)

In other words, broken fear is a positively existing sentiment: it is fear, but broken, reconfigured in a seemingly chaotic way. It can be described as an affective complex in its own right that involves anxiety, excitement, terror, courage, unrest, hope, and an attitude of assertively standing up for one's own point of view. Broken fear as the emotional tone of the revolutionary stormy season does not allow us to neatly distinguish between the positive and negative effects of the revolution. They belong to the same process, the same sentiment.

As time passed, the destructive side of that process became more and more evident in the shape of nervous tension, aggression, confusion, and anxiety. In the traumatising »chaos of emotions«, the path of assertive, aggressive action appeared as a way out.

In the winter of 2012-13, a friend of mine argued that the only way out of the current deadlock was to go from house to house and to kill all the Muslim Brothers. Powerful and destructive as such »fighting words« (Bangstad 2011) can be, they are not the same as fighting. This mentioned friend is known as a man whose words are bigger than his actions. Nobody expected him to follow his own advice. Eventually, when the killing actually began (although it happened in squares and not in houses), he was against it. Such fantasies of violence are part of the process towards actual bloodshed, and yet they might have meant little if it weren't for the possibility to turn them into a reality. Broken fear was the condition of that possibility, for it also affected many taboos and inhibitions that were about maintaining social peace.

Peace is not obvious. It needs to be maintained. Often, it is maintained at a heavy cost. In situations where people live in close proximity and mutual dependency while deeply disliking each other, peace can be much more important than justice. Rural customary law (*urf*) councils, for example, are generally primarily aimed at reaching a compromise and restoring peace rather than establishing truth or delivering justice. But in the mood of assertive, anxious emboldenment, the mechanisms of keeping peace became increasingly hard to uphold, and a terrible, decisive battle became an increasingly attractive and likely option.

### **Decisive battle**

The famous 18 days of January and February 2011 actually felt like a decisive battle. But soon it became clear that the struggle had only begun, and

that little had been decided. In early autumn 2011, in a time when the still great expectations of radical change faced the resilience of the old system that continued to rule Egypt in the shape of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, I heard people talking for the first time about a decisive, bloody battle as a viable solution.

Today, opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood refer to Youtube videos where Brotherhood leaders argue that the death of some is acceptable to reach the good of all, in order to prove that the Brotherhood has always seen violence as a path to power. But the Brotherhood leaders were just saying what a lot of other people were saying, too. In October 2011, for example, one of the revolutionary leftists from the village argued with me that the peaceful revolution had come to a dead end, and that the only way to truly overcome the Mubarak regime and to make a fresh start would be a Libyan-style armed revolution – in other words, a civil war. If it would cost the lives of 10% of Egyptians, it would still be a small price to pay for a better future for the country, he said.

In the spring and early summer of 2013, a terrible decisive battle was expected and desired, not only by the opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood but also by many of its supporters and allies who at that moment still believed that the Army was on their side. There was an escalation of more or less open mutual threats which, in turn, could be utilised as accusations for promoting violence.

The idea of a decisive battle is based on the promise that it will establish how things are, show who is the boss, and replace anxiety and ambivalence by certainty and clarity. It is very appealing because in part, it is true. Struggle can establish clarity.

M., a university graduate in his early twenties, belongs to the circle of leftists from the village. He lives in Alexandria, considers himself a socialist, and is firmly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. On 28 June 2013, he participated in one of the street battles in Sidi Gaber in Alexandria that took place before and after 30 June. Sidi Gaber is one of the key sites for demonstrations in Alexandria, and was at that time claimed by the two mutually hostile currents, resulting in repeated clashes (Ali 2013). These clashes took place largely in the absence of police, and a small number of firearms were used. (As usual, both sides claimed that the other side was responsible for the violence and for using firearms.) This is how M. experienced the clashes on 28 June:

When the thugs of the Brotherhood attacked us on the 28th while we went to protest in Sidi Gaber, that brought one to the point that you have to... You reached a level where you frightened

them, and they are now coming to terrorise you, or to shake you up a bit. And the people who were hit in front of our eyes... Maybe... There was an old man inside the Sidi Gaber tunnel, I took him out of there, he had been hit by a bullet in his shoulder. In his arm, the bone... it wasn't clear, but there seemed to be no bone left, his arm was smashed. We brought him to the field hospital. There the doctor said, 'That's a dum dum bullet. That's the same kind of bullet that killed the martyr al-Husseini Abu Deif.'<sup>4</sup> It made you feel... You reached a point where, if you had had any doubt previously... if you had had any hope that those people [i.e. the Muslim Brothers] might have done so to defend a cause, now they were defending the position of power they had. They would repeat what they did before, they wouldn't be afraid at all to repeat it with you or others. [ ] After that, you continue [i.e. join the 30 June demonstrations], while at the same time you object to there being people in the demonstration with you who chant 'Join us, el-Sisi!' (*inzil ya Sisi*). But there are also people with you in Sidi Gaber, not at the Northern Military Headquarters,<sup>5</sup> people who love to chant for the martyrs and who hold their pictures, who are not in the demonstration to support a certain person.

M. tells us (in an interview recorded in mid-October 2013) how the experience of violence came together with a political history of struggle and created a moment of truth and decision in spite of the doubts he continued to have. This is one of the most attractive and terrifying aspects of engaging in violent confrontation.

Anthropologist Oskar Verkaaik, writing about ethnic violence in the city of Hyderabad in the province of Sindh in Pakistan, argues that daily life and also low-level conflicts are characterised by ambiguity and negotiability where there is space for playfulness and where radical ideas don't need to result in radical acts. But when the people involved sense that there is an urgent existential threat for collective survival, and when people are being killed, there emerges a »condensation of negotiable beliefs into a single existential truth, a conviction that leaves no room for other memories or beliefs.«

<sup>4</sup> Al-Husseini Abu Deif was a photojournalist who was killed in the clashes at the Ittihadiya Palace in November 2012. His killers were never identified, but in the anti-Morsi opposition it was considered certain that they were from the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>5</sup> The Northern Military Headquarters and Sidi Gaber Station are less than one kilometre apart. The headquarters were a focal point of anti-military protests in 2011 and 2012, and of pro-military sentiment on 30 June 2013.



Caricature published on an Islamist satirical Facebook site. Text on the hand reads: »[Electoral] legitimacy is the red line«. Text on the face that gets beaten up reads: »Liberalism; secularism; communism; socialism«. Images and social media posts like this often were copied into anti-Brotherhood media that used them as proof of the inherently violent nature of their opponents.

(Verkaaik 2004: 140) Verkaaik argues that notions of ethnic purity alone do not lead to violence. Most of the time, people with mutually antagonistic visions of purity live in peace. But when violent confrontation occurs, such notions become real in action, and people involved sense that the truth is revealed, that things are clear and certain. Following Verkaaik's argument, I suggest that the ideological polarisation and power struggle of different movements and institutions did not as such result in the escalation of violence unleashed in the summer of 2013. The expectation of bloodshed grew and became concrete because it was accompanied by an assertive mood of broken fear and by repeated events of bloodshed, providing more and more certainty and clarity about the upcoming decisive battle.

### Escalation

Then came 30 June 2013. Supported by massive demonstrations, the army deposed Morsi on 3 July and instated a nominally civilian government. Morsi and the Brotherhood leadership went to prison, his supporters took to the streets, and the dynamic of polarisation and violence took a different turn.

The expectation among many in the 30 June movement had been that the Muslim Brotherhood would attack the protesters, which would have provided an ultimate delegitimisation of their rule. However, the killing that happened on 30 June was almost exclusively related to the storming and defence of the Muslim Brotherhood's headquarters and offices. Perhaps the Brotherhood leaders would have wanted to use force against the protesters on the streets, but they no longer had the military and police under their control. Perhaps they did not want to do it anyway, knowing it would delegitimise them even more. Whatever the case, with the police and army changing sides, the balance and asymmetry of lethal force had already shifted.

After 3 July, the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies followed a strategy of mass protests and martyrdom, at times intentionally provoking the military, and turning every massacre against protesters – and there were many massacres – into a moral claim for the righteousness of their cause of »legitimacy«.<sup>6</sup> The new de facto military government with the 30 June alliance on their side declared that they were »fighting terrorism«, even before terrorist attacks began. »Fighting terrorism« means declaring your enemy to be outside the realms of the law, negotiations, and fair treatment. A »terrorist«, regardless of whether he or she actually commits any acts of terrorism, is by definition a person who can and must be caught or killed before he or she can act.

Martyrdom for legitimacy versus war against terrorism was the recipe for an irreconcilable stand-off that made the escalation very easy, and retreat very difficult. According to Verkaaik, the confrontation in Hyderabad in 1990 reached a point of no return partly through the use of powerful symbolic politics, that made it impossible for the other side to retreat without losing face. This resulted in a situation where police officers facing a women's march had no way out and »went berserk« (Verkaaik 2004: 152), with deadly consequences. In a similar manner, the different sides of the confrontation in Egypt staged a series of powerful symbolic actions in June and July 2013 that left the other party with a choice between a humiliating capitulation and an escalation of the confrontation. The Rabi'a al-Adawiya sit-in was the most tragic of these confrontations. The supporters of Morsi, who had declared to be steadfast for their cause until martyrdom, could not retreat. The military and its allies, having declared their enemies to be terrorists who must be eliminated so that the nation can live, would not let them be. Long before the massacre, everybody knew that the stand-off was going to result in a massacre. Every symbolic gesture in the name of the nation, religion, the people, revolution, or the martyrs made it more difficult to retreat.

This logic was not new – it was introduced in the spring of 2011 when protesters would react to the refusal of the government to accept their demands by instead raising their demands. It had

also always successfully prevented compromises and constructive solutions.

The shift in the asymmetry of violence and the irreconcilable stand-off were accompanied by macabre shifts in how people spoke about sometimes martyrdom, and at other times legitimate force. Many people who saw themselves as revolutionaries continued to celebrate the memory of martyrs like Mina Danial (killed by the army on 9 October 2011), Sheikh Emad Ezzat (killed by the army on 16 December 2011), or Jika (Gaber Salah, killed by the police in November 2012) while at the same time supporting the army and the police in killing Morsi supporters. Among the Brotherhood supporters, the same people who in January-February 2013 had legitimised and defended the killing of protesters by the police in the Port Said Prison massacre, now found themselves the targets of new massacres executed by the same police force. As the supporters of Morsi claimed those killed by the police as martyrs, those who opposed them accused them of »trafficking with blood«, that is, turning the deaths of their own into a political asset. But the way the Brotherhood employed martyrdom as a political asset was not so different from the way in which the revolutionary current had repeatedly turned the deaths of their own into powerful symbols of struggle, nor was it more strategical than the way Egyptian media publicly remembered the deaths of Egyptian soldiers and policemen killed in bomb attacks and the military campaign in the Sinai.



*Graffiti depicting Mina Danial (right) and Sheikh Emad Ezzat, Cairo, February 2013. Photo by Samuli Schielke*

<sup>6</sup> »Legitimacy« refers to the electoral mandate of Morsi's presidency. But in the Islamist discourse in 2013, the notion was transformed into an increasingly abstract and absolute category that referred not so much to the numbers of votes in elections as it invoked the total legality and legitimacy of the Brotherhood's claim for power and the illegality and illegitimacy of competing claims. Because it is an empty, legal category, it turned out to be a poor propagandistic means to regain popular support in the summer of 2013. It has nevertheless become deeply entrenched in the political language of the opponents of the 30 June movement

Although both sides continued to see the other side as the primary perpetrator of violence, the »war against terrorism« brought a different logic



to the violence: a violence of supremacy that no longer fit into the moral logic of defensive struggle and martyrdom. Such violence of supremacy no longer abided by the logic of relative equity of response. It required an inhuman, terrorist enemy to whom such considerations of equity did not apply. Even in the absence of actual violence, the mere fact that the other side would act in a provocative manner became an existential threat that legitimised a call to eradicate them. The more the pro-military party demonised its enemies, the more demonic it became.

M. remembers the discussions at that time, increasingly hovering around the desire to put a clear end point to the confrontation, regardless of the cost, to live and let die:

Then it reached a point where every day you say that these farces and theatres that were going on in the sit-ins of Rabi'a and al-Nahda, and the massacres that happened with them in Isaaf Square or in Ramses, or at the Presidential Guard... All the incidents that happened made one say, 'This farce must have an end.' But how to end it? People tell you, 'Just storm it, man! Finish it!' The thing one most heard was, 'What's the problem if we finish them off?' With the same logic of Morsi, 'So what if one dies so that the others can live?' No! No matter how much the people wanted it to end, and you see that those are your enemies and they don't deserve to live, it's not OK that you get to the point of exterminating them so that you can get rid of them altogether, or so that you can live and take their place.



Portrait distributed on social networks depicting Hala Abu Sha'sha', who was killed in El Mansoura in July 2013 during her participation in a pro-Morsi demonstration

But as M.'s strong misgivings show, this was not a smooth process, and not everybody bought into it. A.S., a man in his mid-twenties from a bourgeois family in Alexandria, had participated in protests ever since 25 January 2011. He was on the streets in January and February 2011, during the Mohamed Mahmoud



TV footage from the military funeral of conscripts killed in action in Rafah in the Sinai, distributed as a still image on social networks in August 2013

uprising in November and December 2011, as well as on many other occasions. He was injured twice and experienced narrow escapes from death. Those were the most beautiful days of his life. He also participated in the 30 June movement, and on 5 July 2013, he was among a large group of demonstrators facing a large group of Morsi supporters in Sidi Gaber in Alexandria. 12 people were killed in the clashes that evolved. The night after the clashes, he wrote on his Facebook page:

What happened today in Alexandria wasn't a victory for us because we pushed the Muslim Brothers to the sea and caught and killed many of them, and neither was it a victory for the Muslim Brothers because they shot us with birdshot and killed many of us. What... what happened today was a human tragedy. The people on both sides no longer felt what they were doing. They just lost their humanity, and were left with their wickedness and love for blood and burning and killing. They began to enjoy when they killed more, and they boast that they killed somebody with a knife in his head or burned his car. That is, when the Muslim Brothers throw one down from the roof and when he dies they shout, 'God is great', celebrating the blood... And when the revolutionaries catch one of the Muslim Brothers, and he tries to escape, and they gather around him, 100 of them, like hungry animals who found a piece of meat and everybody wants a bit of it, happy as hell that they killed him and got rid of the agent and traitor. What stopped me in the middle of all what happened, was when I saw the Salafi man wounded in front of me, the blood flooding the street, and his eyes frightened. At that moment, I imagined that my brother, who is a Salafi, could be in the place of that man. At that moment, I couldn't stay the master of my nerves, and I could no longer understand anything any more. For me, this has nothing to do with either religion, or revolution, or citizenship/patriotism (*muwatana*).



A.S. was shocked and confused when the beauty of revolutionary street action transformed into a bloodthirsty frenzy. For him, this particular struggle – unlike all the ones preceding – brought no clarity but instead confusion, a shattering of the certainty he had had. And yet it would not shatter his enmity towards the Muslim Brothers, although it did alienate him from the short-lived alliance he and others like him had made with military enthusiasts.

The shock and confusion experienced by A.S. was born from witnessing the ugly and wicked reality of decisive battles. But the vast majority of Egyptians only experienced those events through the media – heavily filtered at best, fabricated and twisted at most. For those following the events on their television screens and on social media, neither the frenzy and joy of killing nor the shattering and confusing experience of being part of it were part of their experience of the escalation. Instead, they were offered a much more convenient vision about right and wrong, a vision where their enemies were acting in a wicked, bloodthirsty frenzy while their own side was taking measured, necessary steps to defend the nation against an existential threat. When the fantasy of bloodshed became real, it needed to be heavily filtered to make it feel necessary and appropriate, to prevent moments of shock and confusion like the one A.S. experienced. The illusion of acting in a necessary and limited fashion against inhumanely wicked enemies helped people oscillate between two seemingly incompatible stances: a call to kill the enemy, and the insistence that it was the enemy who was being violent. It is one thing to call for a massacre, and another thing to admit having participated in one. It is also much easier to lose one's humanity in front of a television screen.

### No tears for Rabi'a

This is the moment when what had once been the revolutionary current fell apart. It did not fall apart because they would have disagreed about the 30 June – they were united in that regard.<sup>7</sup> Nor was it a disagreement about their enmity towards the Muslim Brotherhood. The split was caused by their different stances concerning violence and the role of the military leadership. The decisive event, at least in the village in the Nile Delta, was el-Sisi's call to Egyptians to give him the popular »mandate« (*tafwid*) to fight terrorism. The popular mandate, which was followed by a massacre against

Morsi's supporters the next morning,<sup>8</sup> provided the key legitimization for the storming of Rabi'a and al-Nahda less than three weeks later. Those who joined the large-scale demonstrations of the popular mandate considered those who didn't as cowards and traitors. In contrast, those who didn't join the popular mandate (probably fewer in numbers) considered those who did as having sold out the principles of the revolution.

Those opposed to the popular mandate took recourse to a counter-discourse against polarisation and killing that had already formed in June 2013, making use of the humanist notion of humanity/humaneness (*insaniya*) and the Islamic notion of the sanctity of blood (*hurmat al-dam*), the prohibition of shedding the blood of one's own. Among the village leftists, this stance was made most explicit by a middle-aged former member of the Communist Party who emphasised that his stance was »not a political but a moral one«:

If we ask about those who got killed in Rabi'a: »What were they doing there anyway?« (*eh illi waddahum hinak?*), then what were those killed on 25 January doing there anyway, and what were those killed in Mohamed Mahmoud doing there anyway, and what were they all doing there anyway?

That being said, it would be mistaken to claim that those who refused the popular mandate were acting in a moral way, while those who adhered to it were not. In a moment of immediate confrontation, the loss of moral inhibitions and the outbreak of hysterical anger can be an uncontrollable and explosive situation where people just go berserk. But maintaining a mood of righteous anger for weeks or months requires a more conscious work of incitement. It also requires a mood of calm justification of necessity in the face of urgency.

Morality's location is where spontaneous and cultivated emotions meet, and where intuitive gut reactions and reflection come together. Compassion, love, anger, fear, boldness, friendship and enmity can all be spontaneous affects as well as moral principles, and they can be extended or restricted to a greater or smaller number of people. Maintaining uncompromising anger can be just as moral as insisting on the sanctity of blood. In fact, those revolutionaries who in the summer of 2013 stood on the side of uncompromising anger were

<sup>7</sup> Some supporters of the revolutionary current did not join the 30 June movement because they resented the prominent role played by Mubarak loyalists, but in the village, the leftist revolutionary social circles stood united in their support of 30 June.

<sup>8</sup> Protesters from the Rabi'a sit-in tried to expand the area of the sit-in toward the Monument of the Unknown Soldier – an extremely symbolic location for the Egyptian army – and nearly one hundred people were killed when the security forces used live ammunition to disperse the protesters in the early morning hours of 27 July 2013.

very affirmative that their stance was the morally righteous one.

M.S. moved in the same circles of revolutionary leftists in the village. He belonged to those who joined the popular mandate, and for several months, he was not on good talking terms with those who rejected it. In July 2013, he wrote to me, very angry about what in my view was my opposition to arbitrary killings, but in his view was my support for the fascist Muslim Brotherhood. In remarkably internationalist terms, he criticised me for failing to support the anti-fascist struggle that should be the shared cause of the worldwide left. When I finally met him during my next visit to Egypt in October 2013, our tempers had calmed somewhat, and he explained his point of view to me.

Yes, he had been calling »down with military rule« during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in 2011-12, but now, he claimed, the situation was different. As a leftist, secularist activist and an intellectual, he was facing a fundamentally violent fascist movement, and that movement had to be defeated. As an intellectual, he explained, he was not able to beat them in a street fight. To do that, the muscle and the organisation of the army were necessary. For M.S., this was not only a strategic choice. It was a matter of principle. As a Nasserist and a nationalist, he sees the army and the nation as united – however, he sees the role of the army as the protector, not as the leader of the nation. For M.S., who is an active supporter of Nasserist politician Hamdeen Sabbahi, el-Sisi did the right thing in the summer of 2013, but he should not have become president. Even months later, when increasing scepticism spread in the former revolutionary circles who found it hard to deny the reality of a full-scale re-consolidation of the old regime, he made his stance clear on his Facebook account: »So you may call me a *mutabbalati* (»drummer«, propagandist for the regime) and an old regime loyalist, but still the Muslim Brothers are not Egyptians just like us, and not all blood is *haram*.«

Support for the violence of supremacy did not necessarily go hand in hand with support or respect for the military's role. R., a woman from Alexandria active in the revolutionary movement, invested no hope in the military, but she also shed no tears for those killed in Rabi'a. When I met her in the spring of 2014 and we sorted out our different points of view, she insisted that what was happening was »two armed gangs finishing each other off.« The Rabi'a sit-in was armed, she told me. There were only perpetrators, no victims. She and many others put much effort in discursively establishing an equilibrium in the violence that would allow one to claim the position of a righteous outsider and not to ask certain uncomfortable questions.

Be it in the exposed militancy of M.S., or in the way R. took distance from the events by placing

equal blame on the parties involved, these stances required reflection, consideration about right and wrong, means and ends. They along with others were involved in what contemporary anthropology calls ethics (Laidlaw 2013; Lambek 2010; Mahmood 2009): the reflection about the relationship of values and actions, and the cultivation of those values as attitudes. They had strong opinions about right and wrong, and they had thought about them thoroughly.

The term »ethics« seems sympathetic because it is associated with being good, consistent, responsible, and trying to do the right thing. But when people argue that the good, right and responsible thing to do is to kill their enemies, ethics reveals a darker side of human wickedness that needs to be taken seriously.

In his book *The Rebel* (Camus 1991), first published in 1951, Albert Camus addresses murder as the key philosophical problem of the 20th century – a philosophical problem in the very practical sense that philosophy has provided justifications for the oppression and killing of people for the sake of higher aims and ends. This problem quite evidently remains relevant in the 21st century, too. Low, criminal aims can rarely cause as much havoc as high, lofty ideals.

This is not to ignore the fact that power struggles and the defence of vested interests propelled much of the events of the summer of 2013, nor that there were people in charge who cynically and cunningly employed moral panic in order to consolidate their power. But power and interests are not separate from moral concerns. To defend »our« way of life is a matter of interests and values alike, it is about what we value highly as the right and good, and it is about the specific rights and the material goods that we enjoy and do not want to give up. Truly cynical people are rare, and many mass murders have been committed by people who were idealists on their own terms.

In her reportage *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt argues that the most terrifying part about Adolf Eichmann was that he was *not* the fanatical monster as the prosecution tried to depict him. Eichmann saw himself as a law-abiding citizen who had read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* but later replaced the Kantian idea of abstract duty by the Nazi idea of duty towards the Führer (Arendt 2006: 136-7). In the terms of contemporary anthropology, Eichmann was engaged in a reflection about the relation and form of acts and norms. If the engineer of one of the world's greatest mass murders can be described as an ethical man, then we need to rethink what we actually intend when we talk about morality and ethics.

One of the key tasks of anthropologists is to take seriously points of view and visions of life they do not share, even if they strongly disagree with them. Understanding rather than judging should

be our task. In the past couple of decades, Western anthropologists have become reasonably adept at recognising the ethics involved in Islamist revivalist piety, although its aims and ends can be radically at odds with what most anthropologists believe in. Anthropologists have been less adept, however, at giving the same benefit of the doubt to paranoid nationalism in Europe (or to the Christian right in the US, for that matter). One can speculate about the reasons. My hunch is that it is because anthropologists in their own societies are often politically and ideologically in an open conflict with supporters of populist and paranoid nationalism. We are less tempted to be judgemental and derogatory when we speak about people who are not our immediate enemies. But this is not an excuse. If we can give extreme piety the benefit of the doubt on its ethical nature, then we must be able to give the same benefit on extreme nationalism.

With this, I do not mean to say that we should all become relativists who agree that whatever people claim to be right is right for them. Morality is about living with others. It is about contact, communication and conflict. There are no relativistic cultural islands. M.S.'s recourse to the leftist internationalist discourse of anti-fascism is a case in point. What I mean is that we must heed the fact that human evil and wickedness are rooted in the desire to defend the good. There is no safe realm for ultimate righteousness.

### **A plea for confusion and weakness**

To have a consistent moral stance, one needs to engage in reflection – alone or, more typically, with others – about what is right, what is important, and what is to be done. One needs to cultivate it in one's acts and attitudes. But moral reflection also requires moral oblivion. To have faith in something, one must be sceptical about things that might trouble one's faith. Even better, one should not think about such things at all. One has to develop sensibilities and attitudes that make one sarcastic, condescending, or angry about acts and claims that could constitute a competing sense of right and good. One has to use double standards without noticing that one is doing so. In short, one has to make oneself immune towards the views and lifestyles that would trouble the sense of right and good which one has worked hard to make one's own.

The cultivation of moral injury, the way people develop a deep anger about seeing, say, their national symbols or their venerated religious figures challenged, is a good case of how moral oblivion works. Another case is the kind of academic leftism that is very strong among anthropologists in the West. Anthropologists can be highly critical about global power inequalities while not paying much attention towards the way in which their own careers are rooted in a class society.

At no other time is moral oblivion as crucial as in the time of a righteous struggle. This, if any, is the moment of clear, firm stances, a moment of action, a moment of purity. It is a moment when it is necessary to *not* see things from your enemy's point of view, and to *not* question one's own position, but to instead go with the flow of righteous anger. Remembering that the bearded man lying on the street could be one's own brother would destabilise the consistency of the struggle and contaminate its oblivious purity. Purity is a very dirty business.

Such ethics of purity and struggle came to dominate the scene in Egypt in the summer of 2013, preceded and made possible by two and a half years of polarisation and the mixture of aggressive emboldenment and anxious uncertainty that, for the lack of a better word, was called »broken fear«. Among those who sided with el-Sisi's »war on terrorism«, a societal and medial frenzy of extreme anger and disbelief towards those who stood on the other side – liars, terrorists, not Egyptians like all of us – combined with a convenient oblivion about the real shape and extent of the killing and torture that was being committed by one's own side, worked towards a sense of certainty that centred on the positive value of the nation and a sense of urgency that centred on the threat of terrorism. This made the bloodshed that followed not only possible, but also justified, measured, and necessary from the point of view of those who sided with the »war on terrorism«.

If terrible crimes can be committed in the name of lofty values, if *any* stance and *any* action can be ethical with the help of some hard work of cultivation, reflection and oblivion, if anger and fury are such a successful way to prevent potential doubt, then what hope can there be? Can there be a moral stance that may not, in the right circumstances, join the campaign for the mass killing of those whose stance is wrong?

Consistency and reflexivity do not provide a way out. A refusal of political violence in the name of »humanity« and the »sanctity of blood« can be as consistent and well-thought-out as the call for a relentless »war against terror« for the sake of a strong nation, and the same applies to the commitment to martyrdom and confrontation for the sake of »Islamic Law and electoral legitimacy« (*el-shari'a wa-l-shar'iya*), as it also applies to a Jihadist bombing campaign of »martyrdom attacks«. Each stance relies on certain things taken for granted, certain questions not asked, certain instinctive reactions escalated while others are suppressed.

But of course, humans are seldom consistent. Consistency requires struggle – both in the sense that one must sometimes struggle to maintain an »illusion of consistency« (Ewing 1990), as well as in the sense that a meaningful struggle is the most powerful way to maintain that illusion. Peace, in

comparison, is a messy and hypocritical affair of compromises, concessions, and questionable deals. And most of the time, humans live in relative peace.

And yet struggle creates not only moments of clarity but also moments of confusion, moments when the cultivation of certainty and oblivion fails. One such moment was A.S.'s shock when the beauty of the struggle transformed into the joy of killing. Another such moment is described by M. in the following. M. does not reject political violence in principle, but soon after 30 June, he became suspicious of the military leadership's intentions and participated in the discourses of humanity and the sanctity of blood. However, in the middle of an unresolved stand-off and a media outburst of one alarming report after another, he, too, began to hope that the storming of the Rabi'a al-Adawiya sit-in would put an end to the escalation, and at first he even bought into the official narrative of »self-constraint« by the police:

We were happy when the storming of Rabi'a began. In the beginning, when the storming began, We were sitting together and watching [on television]. We thought: »Beautiful! They are evicting them without hurting them. Just shooting some tear gas at them...« And all the stuff that was said on TV at first, and all the images that were broadcast on ONTV or the other channels that were covering it.<sup>9</sup> [...] We were all... or never mind »we«, let me just speak for myself. I was sitting and watching, and I was happy that it was over, and that it was just tear gas without excessive violence, and I said, »Now you really are doing something. You are decreasing the tension inside the people against the Muslim Brothers. You put an end to it, and relieve people from the violence that was accumulating inside those in the Rabi'a and al-Nahda sit-ins.« And then, when the numbers got known, and the aggression and violence that happened, and the horrible way they dealt with the people inside the Rabi'a sit-in... And graver than the numbers of people who got killed was how the people who previously were angry about violent treatment against anybody, now when the violence was against others and far from them... It makes you realise that before, you weren't against violence just because you are against violence. People were against violence because it targeted them. When it turned away from them and targeted those they hate, it became good. Now they want it, prefer it, and they demand that it is

used against those people, and they tell you that that's the only way to deal with those people.

M.'s stance was not a consistent one – or, more precisely, he did not try to depict his decisions and choices as consistent, because he experienced confusion that he could not, or would not, rationalise and explain away. Unlike M.S., who was firm in his stance of a righteous struggle by all means necessary, M. could not feel joy in seeing his enemy defeated when he realised what that meant in practice. He could not resist the temptation to see his enemies as fellow human beings.

It can take a lot of strength and integrity not to follow the escalation of polarisation and moral anger, »to maintain one's humanity« as those who were against escalation and bloodshed in the summer of 2013 put it (Youssef 2013). But in a time when so much emotional and ethical work is invested in creating and maintaining enmity, weakness can also become a virtue. Being a coward can rescue one from the destructive stand-off of fearless confrontation (see Shehata 2013b). Temptation can become the change of creating a crack in the carefully crafted wall of an absolute good-evil binary. The sense of *irbak* – bewilderment, confusion, and loss of solid ground – can become an antithesis to fiercely cultivated determination and oblivion. These sentiments came too late to prevent the bloodshed. But maybe they can show a way out from the deadlock of certainties.

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<sup>9</sup> M. and his friends would not watch Al-Jazeera which they disliked and distrusted because of its pro-Muslim Brotherhood bias.



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